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BATMAN

Winick & Nguyen on Batman: Something to Crow About

Brian Azzarello and *Eduardo Risso* had the toughest job of all—they had to follow up the history-making *Jeph Loeb-Jim Lee-Scott Williams* run on ***Batman***. They came through with flying colors, maintaining the momentum—but now that their run is coming to an end, the spotlight is about to turn to the *next* creative team. And that's a lot of pressure to deal with...

But *Judd Winick*, *Dustin Nguyen*, & *Richard Friend* feel up to the challenge.

"When Jeph and Jim's run took off into the stratosphere," Winick said, "the discussion at DC immediately became, 'What will we do next?' Frankly, virtually everybody has a good Batman story in them, and since 'Hush' gave them the time to look for them, they decided to go down that route, and find people to do stories."

Winick had no idea that he would be producing ***Batman's*** third high-profile story arc . "Calling it a happy accident would not be entirely wrong," Winick explained. "It all started around the time of WonderCon this past year. I'd just moved to San Francisco, and the whole DC gang was out there for the show. I was having lunch with *Dan DiDio*, and we were talking about, actually, nothing in particular–it was one of those lunches where we were catching up on everything I was currently doing, with no discussion of new projects. On the way back, we were sort of having some idle talk about a bunch of stuff, and he told me that he had his hands full with a bunch of artists who wanted to work on ***Batman***, and not enough people to write it.

"I asked who the artists were, and Dan fired back with, 'Do you have time to do ***Batman***?' I asked again who the artists were. One of the first names was Dustin, and when I heard that, I told him to sign me up. If Dustin wanted to work with me, I wanted to work with him. He's never done Batman, he really wanted to, and for my first Batman story–Dustin's the guy I'd like to see draw it. So, Dan checked, and Dustin was on board. Then I had to figure out what the story was going to be."

It was ***Batman*** group editor *Bob Schreck* who decided that Winick's run would follow up Azzarello's. "Ever since I started at DC, it's been an unspoken understanding that one day Judd and I would do a ***Batman*** run," *Bob Schreck* told CSN. "We always knew it, it was just a matter of time. This seemed to be the right time. He's a great writer, so why not?"

As he began to assemble his storyline, Winick had to scrutinize what Loeb and Azzarello had done before him; while each story arc is largely self-contained, Winick knew that the tone of his arc couldn't stray too far from what had come before. "I had a very specific story in mind, five issues long, get in and get out," Winick said. "My concern was too not start off with a big old, 'blammo' start. I had to fight that urge, because following Jeph and Jim and Azzarello and Risso's respective runs—well, they're just hard to top in that regard.

"I think the big 'whammo' quality that people will see right away is Dustin doing Batman. It's a wonderfully action-heavy arc, Batman with two major villains, a major upheaval villain-wise, and things change. This isn't one of those stories that if it never happened, you wouldn't notice. There will be some distinct changes, particularly with the villains, by the time we're done."

Winick and Nguyen's arc will feature actual continuity links with the earlier arcs—something that many fans had asked for after Azzarello's arc showed little connection with the Loeb's storyline. . "We're going to tie this one back to the two previous story arcs," Winick said. "DC doesn't want the overall series to seem like it's a collection of repurposed miniseries under the title of ***Batman***. There will be a certain level of continuity between the three, albeit minor—but having read the previous issues will help, although it will not be essential."

Will the continuity that Winick is working into this story arc continue into future story arcs as well? "Yes, it will—for the most part," *Bob Schreck* said. "However, those characters are malleable and can endure many interpretations. There's always going to be room for something outside the monthly/yearly continuity. So many talented creators are keen to bring their own unique vision to bear on the Batman characters... It's just too tempting to not see what they can bring to light to the old man and his crew."

Winick's story arc will pit Batman and Robin against two of their most famous adversaries—the Penguin and the Scarecrow.. "I wanted to write something that would play to Dustin's strengths," Winick said. "Frankly, a lot of people don't take that into account when they're doing collaborative work. Certain artists are amazing at certain things, but while maybe not as strong at other aspects. Dustin's incredibly well-rounded, but I wanted to write what he would love to draw. That's where that portion of the inspiration came from. There were characters that I definitely wanted to write about in the story, and then I figured on what Dustin could really do well, and it was a no-brainer to put it all together.

"Dustin's especially happy with it too—the first issue has loads of action, and we really put Batman through the paces. He's going to be able to draw Batman, as well as put in some very inventive and fun

AND BEHOLD I AWAKE!
HE'S GOT ENOUGH EXPLOSIVES TO BLOW DOWN SEVERAL FENCE'S HIS SIZE.
AND HE'S WAY TOO SPECIAL.
MAYBE HE'S A B.E.R.
HE'S BEHOLD HUMAN THINGS.
TOO MANY EXPLOSIVES IN HERE.
TOO ANGRY.

stuff. Honestly, I think it's really going to be a great move for Dustin. I'm not sure how much the mainstream comic readers know about him. He's almost been exclusively doing Wildstorm, particularly *Wildcats* for the past little while, and now, he's moving to the #1 book, writing one of the most popular characters in the medium."

Just in case you're not familiar with Nguyen's artistic strengths, here's a quick summary, courtesy of Winick. "I guess the best way to describe it, is that Dustin does this incredible dark-neon-Los Angeles-noir. I think a good comparison is to Risso, where Risso does this great, dark, New York underbelly look. Dustin can handle guys in sharp suits, technology—all very slick and believable. He's really good at characterization as well. None of his people look alike—they're not cookie cutter. If you look at his characters, they have different facial bone structures. All his men and women have different builds. It's really amazing. To top it off, it's an incredibility clean, precise look—very deliberate. There's no hiding."

Dustin Nguyen isn't he only artist involved in this project: *Matt Wagner* has also signed on for the story arc, supplying the painted cover art for each issue. *Bob Schreck* explained how Wagner came to be involved in the series. "I've been one of Matt's closest buddies for over twenty years and we've worked on so many projects at just about every comics publishing house that ever existed.... So, once again, it was only a matter of time. He and I worked together with Judd on the *Green Arrow* run and when he was done there and having just finished his ***Batman/Wonder Woman/Superman: Trinity*** books, the three of us looked at each other and it was kind of obvious: we'll let's get back together over here on the Batman arc."

Does Wagner have any creative concerns over story arcs that feature one artist on the cover and another on the interiors? "Over the years, I've come to realize that these are two completely different skills," Wagner said, "and being good at one doesn't necessarily mean that you're good at the other. Many of my favorite comic story-tellers are European and a lot of these guys are absolutely fabulous interior artists. Sadly, their cover work is often unspectacular... And I'm sure anyone

reading this can think of several American cover artists whose work they just love. When it's—rarely, I know—announced that one of these guys is going to do a whole book, you get so excited... and then when the final product arrives—well, let's just say it often leaves a lot to be desired. I like to think, and some would probably argue otherwise, that at this point in my career, I'm finally good at both the insides as well as the outs. From what Schreck's told me, Dustin's fine with my being on the covers, so we're all good to go."

Wagner only occasionally sees the full script of the books for which he supplies the cover art. "It's usually a description from the writer, and sometimes a full script. Again, I feel like I'm good at coming up with the necessary cover image that will entice both old and new readers, so I don't feel like I really need more than that...

"Here's an instance of how I change things to suit what I feel are the needs for the cover as opposed to its matching interior moment. For this first ***Batman*** cover, Judd had a scene that seemed like the natural choice for the cover image—a hand pointing a gun at a distorted, monstrous version of Batman. But, the way Dustin chose to illustrate that scenario for the interior pages was too far gone for the cover. It works really well as the sequence unfolds for the reader, but his depiction of Batman was even more distorted and unrecognizable, *a la* the crook's point of view. I decided to pull back on that a bit and make the creature appear a bit more 'Batman-ish' for the cover. It is a Batman book, after all, and the buyer needs to be able to see him or some overwhelming aspect of him therein."

Even before the Winick-Nguyen-Friend story arc has begun, *Bob Schreck* is already looking ahead at future arcs—but he's not ready to reveal who'll be doing the creative honors next. "I have several in the works, but it's always like a day at Belmont Park—we just place our bets and wait to see who finishes first."

But right now, the spotlight is on *Judd Winick*, *Dustin Nguyen*, and *Richard Friend*, who feel up to the challenge of matching what *Jeph Loeb, Jim Lee, Scott Williams, Brian Azzarello*, and *Eduardo Risso* have done before them. "All told, I'm pleased, thrilled and honored to be doing this story, and thrilled that DC has opened the door for me in the first place. I'm just happy that DC trusts me enough to let me play with the big toys, and is letting me tell the best stories I can in the best ways possible."

***Batman* #626**, the kickoff issue of the five-part "As the Crow Flies" story arc, is scheduled for April 28th release.

BY CLIFF BIGGERS (WITH MATT BRADY)

Courtesy your friendly neighborhood comics outlet!

Comic Shop Newsarama

Produced by *Comic Shop News* in cooperation with *Matt Brady* and *newsarama.com*

Comics' Labor Force

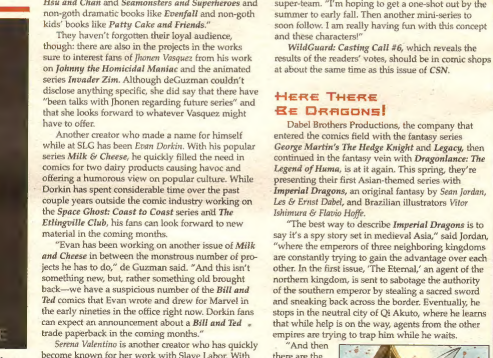
"Slave Labor—aren't they the goth publisher?"

"Nah, they're the skate-punk guys."

Anyone who minimizes Slave Labor as a niche publisher hasn't been paying attention to the company's recent output. Sure, they're the home to ***Johnny the Homicidal Maniac***, ***Squee***, and ***Lenore***—but there's a lot more happening behind the SLG/Amaze Ink imprint!

"With manga pretty much dominating that market as far as comics and graphic novels are concerned, other publishers have been looking to not only get their books into bookstores, but to appeal to the readers who buy manga—teenage girls. I find that exciting since, well, I used to be a teenage girl, and I remember a comics world that seemed to only marginally care about what I wanted to read," SLG's *Jennifer de Guzman* told *Comic Shop Newsarama's Chris Arrant*. "The core comics readers are always going to have comics to read, but the manga explosion has kind of shaken up the industry and shown everyone that, hey, there's this big group of potential readers that you've discounted all these years, and they'll read and buy comics like mad if you give them something they like.

"For SLG, appealing to teenage girls is pretty much business-as-usual, though. They're an audience



that our books have been very popular with before 2003, and they'll continue to be popular with them after 2004. Here at SLG, we kept the bookstore market in mind as we plan our new trade paperbacks and graphic novels, but we're going to continue to support the pamphlet format. A lot of 2003 was devoted to putting out new series that appeal to our audience—those teenage girls among them—like ***Little Scrowlie***, ***Outlook: Grim***, ***Bear*** and ***Serenity Rose***..."

In an effort to reach new audiences and try new things, SLG has been consistent in offering new, original books by some SLG favorites and new creators alike. De Guzman was gracious enough to give us a sneak peek at SLG's line-up for the first half of 2004, and reveals quite a bevy of talent: "We have three new series premiering over the next few months—***Pirate Club*** by *Derek Hunter* in February, ***Street Angel*** by *Jim Rugg & Brian Maruca* in March and ***The Ghouly Boys*** by *Christopher* in April. We also have some original graphic novels lined up, one an all-ages color book by *Ian & Tyson Smith*, who did ***Oddjob*** for us, called ***Emily and the Intergalactic Lemonade Stand***, which we have scheduled for June. Another is a collection of the Xeric Award-winning ***Gordon Yamamoto and the King of the Geeks*** by *Gene Yang*." SLG is also publishing quite a few trade paperbacks from their most popular series, including the third ***GloomCookie*** collection, ***Nightmares & Fairy Tales***, and ***Bear***.

"We're also testing the water with something different for us, too—a book that is an illustrated prose book called ***The 13th of Never***," de Guzman revealed. "It's written and drawn by ***Crab Scrambly***, who did the paintings for ***Everything Can Be Beaten***, which Jhonen—ah, I mean *Chancre Scoles*—wrote. ***Beaten*** was a prose book, but ***13th*** is an illustrated novella, rather than a storybook. We'll see how it goes with this one. I enjoy editing fiction; it's where I got my start in editing, so I'm very comfortable working with it. We'll just have to see how our readers respond to it."

SLG is aware that some have tried to shoehorn them into a niche, but they want readers to realize that there's a lot more to their line. "Part of me wants to say, 'Yeah, so what if we publish 'goth' comics? You got a problem with that, punk?' In the nicest possible way, of course," de Guzman joked. "Really, if someone says, 'They publish goth comics' as criticism, it's most likely a person I'm not going to have much patience for. Our spooky comics are an important part of our line, no doubt about that. We like these books, and we wouldn't stop publishing them. Just last year we added ***Outlook: Grim***, ***Little Scrowlie***, and ***Serenity Rose*** to our line, and we're proud to have them. Comics like ***Johnny, GloomCookie***, and ***Lenore*** have brought readers to comics, and that's always the goal, isn't it? There's some resentment out there among long-time comics readers who think that comics like our spooky comics or manga are bringing people into the comic book world who aren't the 'right' kind of fan or something, and that's just ridiculous. I think that kind of attitude is, fortunately, on the decline.

"I should still make this clear, though—*we don't* publish just goth comics," de Guzman explained. "We've got decidedly non-goth humor books like ***Hsu and Chan*** and ***Seamonsters and Superheroes*** and non-goth dramatic books like ***Evenfall*** and non-goth kids' books like ***Patty Cake and Friends***."

They haven't forgotten their loyal audience, though: there are also in the projects in the works sure to interest fans of *Jhonen Vasquez* from his work on ***Johnny the Homicidal Maniac*** and the animated series ***Invader Zim***. Although deGuzman couldn't disclose anything specific, she did say that there have "been talks with Jhonen regarding future series" and that she looks forward to whatever Vasquez might have to offer.

Another creator who made a name for himself while at SLG has been *Evan Dorkin*. With his popular series ***Milk & Cheese***, he quickly filled the need in comics for two dairy products causing havoc and offering a humorous view on popular culture. While Dorkin has spent considerable time over the past couple years outside the comic industry working on the ***Space Ghost: Coast to Coast*** series and ***The Ethiopelia Club***, his fans can look forward to new material in the coming months.

"Evan has been working on another issue of ***Milk and Cheese*** in between the monstrous number of projects he has to do," de Guzman said. "And this isn't something new, but, *rather* something old brought back—we have a suspicious number of the ***Bill and Ted*** comics that Evan wrote and drew for Marvel in the early nineties in the office right now. Dorkin fans can expect an announcement about a ***Bill and Ted*** trade paperback in the coming months."

Serena Valentino is another creator who has quickly become known for her work with Slave Labor. With her series ***GloomCookie*** about to appear in its third collection, and the recent series ***Nightmares & Fairytales*** already slated for a collection, Valentino has quickly become a name talent. "Serena is a talented, intelligent and sweet lady, wonderful to work with," de Guzman said. "I'm looking forward to editing her next book, ***1400 Rue Royale***—it's another prose piece, like ***The 13th of Never*** She's successful because of what I mentioned earlier in regards to new creators—she loves what she does and is committed to doing it well. And she's consistent. ***GloomCookie*** is going to hit issue #20 in June, and ***Nightmares & Fairy Tales*** will have ten in December. We can count on Serena to give us great stuff. She's a real pillar of the company..."

SLG also had another recent success in *Scott Mills'* ***Seamonsters & Superheroes***. Originally scheduled as a mini-series, it was recently announced that it would continue as an ongoing series. "*Scott Mills* has a mind overflowing with stories about sea monsters and superheroes, it seems," de Guzman said. "Once he got started, he couldn't stop! We'll keep on publishing it and eventually get it collected into a trade, most probably."

Slave Labor continues to look for new talent and new projects that expand the company's offerings. "We choose new books to publish that we think will find an audience, but it's not all about finding the next 'big thing.' You'll kill yourself with frustration thinking about that. That said, there are still people to keep your eye out for—artists who had their first comics published in 2003 and are continue to give us quality stuff, like *Black Olive* (***Outlook: Grim***), *Jamie Smart* (***Bear***), and *Aaron A* (***serenity rose***), and artists who are new this year—like *Derek Hunter, Jim Rugg and Brian Maruca*, and *Christopher*. They're people who are committed to their work—and you can't be successful in independent comics without having a devotion to what you create."

The Vote Is In!...

Competitors vote in a variety of reality-tv shows... creators vote for outstanding works of film, music, television, and comics... citizens vote in primaries and caucuses... and now, thanks to *Todd Nauck*, fans have a vote, too!

In his series ***WildGuard: Casting Call***, Nauck offered the book's readers a chance to decide which characters would make the cut and become a part of the team. "The readers were voting for the fifth member of the WildGuard team. WildGuard is a 'made-for-tv' superteam," Nauck said. "The first mini-series, ***Casting Call***, is the origin of the team. it's ***American Idol*** meets superheroes. So, with the online voting, the readers put one of forty-six characters onto the team as an official member. The readers really had a hand in creating this team. And they really seemed to enjoy the chance to interact with the book."

Judging from the response, to say they enjoyed it would be a bit of an understatement. "The response was great! We had over eight thousand votes by the November deadline. The voters were campaigning for their favorite character on the WildGuard forums in hopes of swaying other people's votes."

WildGuard: Casting Call is the first of what Nauck foresees as a series of projects involving the super-team. "I'm hoping to get a one-shot out by the summer to early fall. Then another mini-series to soon follow. I am really having fun with this concept and these characters!"

WildGuard: Casting Call #6, which reveals the results of the readers' votes, should be in comic shops at about the same time as this issue of ***CSN***.

Here There Be Dragons!

Dabel Brothers Productions, the company that entered the comics field with the fantasy series ***George Martin's The Hedge Knight*** and ***Legacy***, then continued in the fantasy vein with ***Dragonlance: The Legend of Huma***, is at it again. This spring, they're presenting their first Asian-themed series with ***Imperial Dragons***, an original fantasy by *Sean Jordan, Les & Ernst Dabel*, and Brazilian illustrators *Vitor Ishimura & Flavio Hoffe*.

"The best way to describe ***Imperial Dragons*** is to say it's a spy story set in medieval Asia," said Jordan, "where the emperors of three neighboring kingdoms are constantly trying to gain the advantage over each other. In the first issue, 'The Eternal,' an agent of the northern kingdom, is sent to sabotage the authority of the southern emperor by stealing a sacred sword and sneaking back across the border. Eventually, he stops in the neutral city of Qi Akuto, where he learns that while help is on the way, agents from the other empires are trying to trap him while he waits.

"And then there are the Imperial Dragons–a faction of powerful martial artists who work to protect the balance of power between the three kingdoms. Unfortunately, most of the Dragons are also incredibly corrupt, and some are secretly on the payroll of one, two, or three emperors at any given time. As the Dragons descend upon Qi Akuto to search for the Eternal, their captain, Fashi 'the Immaculate,' is secretly working to root out the corruption in his own ranks and return the Imperial Dragons to their former glory."

"On the surface, I know, it seems like a really complicated story," Jordan said, "and that's not even everything that happens in the first issue. It's not long before the Eternal realizes that almost everyone is lying about something–and some of the characters are lying about everything. But part of the fun is guessing, along with the Eternal, who can be trusted... and who's really working for a different emperor."

"The cool thing about ***Imperial Dragons*** is that it's really, really smart writing," Les Dabel of DB Productions said. "I think there are more double-crosses and red herrings in the first three issues than you'll find in most detective novels. It's kind of funny, because the original idea for the story was a pretty straightforward martial arts adventure. When we handed it over to Sean, he went wild and created something totally new and different–and the end result is a book that grabs ahold of you and doesn't let go until you hit the last page of the final issue."

Imperial Dragons #1, slated to debut in May, will appear under the Devil's Due imprint.

Courting Victory

The *Neil Gaiman-Todd McFarlane* legal wrangle regarding several Spawn-related characters is, at long last, over and done with. In mid-February, the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit sided with Gaiman, recognizing as the creator and co-owner of Angela, Medieval Spawn, and Cogliostro.

"It's also, I think, an important judgement for protecting creators from rapacious or crooked publishers," Gaiman wrote at his website, "in that it clarifies what a copyright notice is there for, and what a copyright form is there for. A publisher can't (as Todd did) file a form with the copyright office three years after something has been published, claiming to have writ-

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ten something that was written by someone else (er, me in this case) and thus start the statute of limitations running for copyright purposes—if the real author doesn't find out about this within three years, he or she has lost his copyright... Nor can a publisher sneakily set the statute of limitations running by printing a different copyright notice on a later edition of a work, again, as Todd did.

Furthermore, according to Gaiman, "it's still full steam ahead now for the ***Miracleman*** plans, and now I need to figure out what I want to do with Angela, Cogliostro and Medieval Spawn...One thing that the court case *did* establish was that Todd obviously didn't, as he had been claiming, own all of Miracleman. As far as I can tell, or any of the lawyers working with us on the case could tell, Todd probably doesn't actually own any share of Miracleman. He certainly has no copyright in any of the existing work...

"There may well need to be a final court case to tie up some of the last loose ends on ***Miracleman***, which may wind up going to some very fun places indeed. At least with *1602*, there's the money there to fight it. And there are a lot of places that want to republish the work that's been done on ***Miracleman***, and the new work that Mark and I hope to do.

"As regards the Angela, Cogliostro, and Medieval Spawn characters, Todd and I are simply co-copyright holders, just as we've been since I created the characters with him in 1993. He needs to financially account for everything he's done with them so far and in the future, just as I'll have to account to him when I license out, say, an Angela trade paperback, or license out the rights to do Medieval Spawn comics and merchandise...

Gaiman added that he hoped "we can move on and bring the existing ***Miracleman*** back legitimately into print, and that I can finish ***Miracleman: The Silver Age*** and write the concluding book, ***The Dark Age***; and that the CBLDF (and possibly some other comics-based charities) can make some money out of all this foolishness."

Remains of the Day

Steve Niles has done vampires, he's done ghouls, he's done Frankensteinian monsters—so there's not much left in the horror field, right?

Well, there are some ***Remains*** that Niles found very interesting...

Remains, a new series by Niles and artist *Kieron Dwyer*, is a zombie horror tale in the *Living Dead* vein. The story focuses on a blackjack dealer and an exotic dancer who find themselves trapped in a Reno casino, surrounded by zombies who are less interested in gambling than they are in a fresh-meat buffet.

"This isn't so much a love/horror story," Niles said, "as it's a story of waking up next to someone you wished you hadn't slept with... oh, and the world has been overrun by flesh-eating living dead, too."

"Zombies aren't the newest monster on the block," IDW Editor-in-chief *Jeff Mariotte* added. "But they may be the coolest, especially the way Niles and Dwyer bring them to... well, not-life. Fans of the flesh-eaters are going to want to get in on the ground floor of this new classic."

Remains #1 is scheduled for mid-May release from IDW.

Ins & Outs

Out ***Aquaman #15,*** the first issue by the new creative team of *Will Pfeifer, Patrick Gleason, & Christian Alamy*, which has sold out less than a week after release. "Patrick and I always knew Aquaman was a

character with loads of potential," says Pfeifer, "and I'm glad to see the fans agree. I hope everyone sticks around for the duration, because we've got some wild stuff coming up that's going to show why Aquaman is one of the top guys in the DCU."

In ***Warren Ellis,*** the acclaimed writer who recently wrapped up an exclusive with DC, is Marvel-bound. Ellis has confirmed that he will be joining artist *Stuart Immonen* (who recently signed an exclusive with Marvel) to take over ***Ultimate Fantastic Four*** beginning with ***Ultimate FF #7***.

In Corgi Toys, who has signed an agreement with DC to produced a Batmobile line of die-cast vehicles. The new line, replicas of some of the earliest Batmobiles from the versions of the vehicle presented in ***Batman*** since 1939.

"Our licensing agreement with Warner Bros. Consumer Products, on behalf of DC Comics, is allowing us to create a whole new line of Batman products for global distribution," Corgi's *Peter Gardiner* said. "By fall, new Batmobiles, based on content from Batman comic books, will be in all the major markets: Japan, the UK, Germany, France, Australia, Mexico, Brazil, China and, of course, the U.S."

Corgi will produce eleven Batmobiles and related vehicles for 2004. Included will be the 1940s Batmobile, a Jokermobile and a Batbike, as well as the 1960s Batmobile and the 2004 See-Through Batmobile. High end Batmobile models will come with a "Virtual Video" unit, a PDA-sized lenticular screen containing a voice chip that allows an animated Batman to deliver custom phrases.

Out ***Chosen #1,*** the first issue controversial *Mark Millar-Peter Gross* series about the second coming of Christ, has sold out of its first printing. "*Mark Millar* has really crafted a great story on a very interesting subject and it's wonderful to see people respond to it," series editor *David Land* said. "Without question, you won't want to miss the rest of this series!" No decision has been made yet regarding a second printing.

In Acclaimed comics illustrator *P. Craig Russell*, who has reported on his message board that he has been in contact with *Joe Quesada* about doing a Marvel project with Neil Gaiman. This certainly won't be the first time that Russell and Gaiman have worked together; the two have collaborated on ***Sandman #50*** and the graphic novel ***Murder Mysteries***.No word yet as to what project they might produce together, but speculation is centering on Dr. Strange and Nick Fury.

Out *Igor Kordey*, who has been abruptly dismissed as artist of the upcoming ***Excalibur*** series. Even though he finished the first issue and was already working on the second, Kordy reported that the first issue was being redrawn by another artist and that his work would not appear in the series at all. Kordey is already in talks with other publishers regarding future projects—and as soon as his next assignment is firmed up, you'll hear about it in *CSN*!

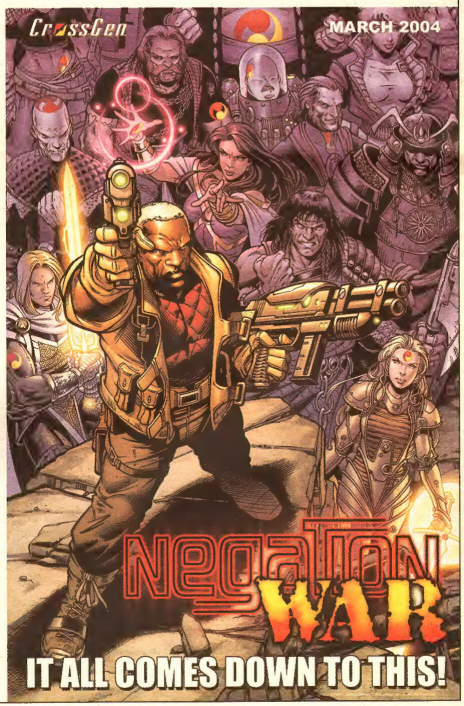
In Four new manga series—***Saikano, Cheeky Angel, Imadoki,*** and ***Red River***—which will join the impressive array of manga offered by Viz, a pioneer in the American manga market. These four titles will appear in late June or early July.

"Viz is pleased to add to our growing family of shôjo manga with the addition of two new titles from some of the best-known artists of the genre," Viz president/CEO *Seiji Horibuchi* said. "Young women have become a significant segment of the manga market and we hope these titles further break down the barriers and misconceptions of what comics can be about and who is inclined to read them."

Out ***Conan #1*** by *Kurt Busiek & Cary Nord*, which has totally sold out of its first printing (which included a hefty overprinting) "I'm just grateful to the creative team for making this possible," ***Conan*** editor *Scott Allie* said. " We knew that ***Conan*** would be a big property for us, but the sincerity with which these guys attacked the job-from cover to letters and everything in between-is what makes the book irresistible." Allie confirmed that Dark Horse would offer a second printing of the book with a cover by *J. Scott Campbell*.

In ***Sin City,*** which will be in theaters within the next year, thanks to director *Robert Rodriguez* and Dimension Films. According to Variety, Rodriguez has already filmed the opening to the movie with *Josh Hartnett* and *Marley Shelton*. Rodriguez will cast the remaining roles and begin filming in earnest in March. The film will incorporate storylines from three of *Frank Miller's* graphic novels—***Sin City, That Yellow Bastard,*** and ***The Big Fat Kill***. "This is the first time a graphic novel will be treated with absolute respect in how it is brought to the life. My pitch to Frank was that I didn't want to adapt *Sin City*, but rather translate it to the screen. I also wanted him involved in every aspect of the production, including sharing in the directing. If you look at his books, you see that in a way they are already the best written, shot, and directed 'movies' never seen in a theater," Rodriguez said.

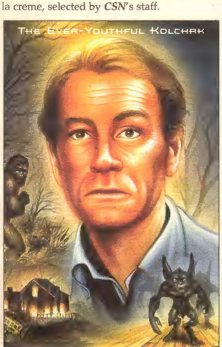
"Robert came to me with a bold, coherent plan to bring my baby to the screen," Miller added. "This is gonna be a whole new kind of crime movie."



Rek K Awards

The Readers Strike Back!

Back in December, *CSN* offered its *Red K Awards* for achievement, dubious or otherwise. We asked you to mail us your *Red K* choices for the past year's comic book highlights and lowlights, and that's just what you did! We received hundreds of responses again this year—and here are the creme de la creme, selected by *CSN*'s staff.



The "Night Stuff" Award

Kolchak

"For years, lots of companies have talked about doing a ***Kolchak: The Night Stalker*** comic, but it took Moonstone—a fledgling company, no less!—to actually come through with it. On top of that, the comics have done a dead-on job of capturing the feel of the old series."
—Jordan Simmons

The "All in the Family?" Award

John Constantine

"Yes, I understand that sleeping with her will create a god-like child that will eventually save humanity. But dude—that's your *sister*!"
—Cora Worden

The "Irrational Numbers" Award

Marvel's Numbering System

The recent practice of Marvel Comics to include two issue numbers on many of its comics is maddening.. The way I figure it....that gives them twice as many reasons to call an issue "Special". ***Fantastic Four #500?*** But wasn't it just seventy scant issues ago that the folks at Marvel were highly touting ***Fantastic Four #1?*** What gives? Either it's #1, or it's #429! But wait.....didn't the first series end with #416? In Marvel math, 416 + 71= 500? I know....I know....there was second volume which had thirteen issues. That makes Volume 2, Number 1 actually Volume 1, Number 417. In twenty more issues, will they revert back to ***FF #100***? Not only is it confusing for the fans, but it's going to wreak havoc on the price guide people! Now comes ***Spectacular Spider-Man #1***... or is it #264? My vote....pick a number.....and *stick with it!*"
—Paul Cooke

The "Doom's Day" Award

Dr. Doom

"After too many years as a watered-down version of himself, Victor Von Doom returned to the evil bad-ass he was always meant to be. In the 'Unthinkable' and 'Authoritive Action' storylines, Doom put the FF through the wringer, leaving them physically, emotionally and psychologically scarred and reminding everyone why he is *the* comic book villain."
—Michael Weyer

The "Dead Like Me" Awards

Batman #616

"Everyone thought that Jason Todd was back and the identity of Hush had been revealed three issues before the end of the series. Nice switcheroo, Jeph and Jim!"
—Christine Corby

The "No Sugar Tonight" Award

Sugar & Spike

"So where are they? DC gave us a reprint and a soft-toy set, but nothing since then. Come on, let's get those ***Sugar and Spike*** digests and Archives going!"
—Cassie Eccles
(Editor's note: No, we didn't tell Cassie to write this—but once we saw it, you can be sure we would include it!)

The "Not Much of a Splash" Award

Marvel's Tsunami line

Marvel's Tsunami line brought us some very interesting titles and others not so interesting, but, it was an awful idea to launch almost a dozen titles in less than three months. Where are we supposed to get money for buy them?"
—Manuel Alejandro Macias

The "What Is It Good For?" Award

War Comics

Over the past year, DC has released a ***Sgt. Rock*** graphic novel, Archive edition of both Rock and Enemy Ace, and another round of ***War Story***—but they have no regular war comics? C'mon, DC—you publish comics for nearly every taste, so howsabout something for us war buffs?"
—Jordan Simmons

The "Osteoporosis" Award

Bone

"I can't believe that we're actually losing ***Bone***. I've only been reading comics for about six years, but I've been reading ***Bone*** all that time, just waiting for *Jeff Smith* to do another issue and, once he did, wishing that it didn't end so quickly. I'm sort of glad that he's a little bit late with the last few issues, because that way I know that the series isn't over yet..."
—Leslie Easterwood

The "Hits & Myths" Award

Mythology-style art volumes

"***Mythology*** was a fascinating and beautiful book spotlighting *Alex Ross's* art, but it left me wondering why there haven't been similar books collecting the really great cover art of people like *Brian Bolland* and *Dave Johnson* and *Adam Hughes*? And why doesn't DC just publish these books themselves, rather than going to an outside publisher to do it?"
—Cody Portman

The "Price Is Right" Award

$9.95 manga trade paperbacks

"Lots of people have complained about American comics being priced too high at $2.25 to $2.99 per book, but readers seem to have no problem dropping ten bucks per book on manga trade paperbacks. I guess it's not really the price that matters, but the perceived value. If readers feel like they're getting enough entertainment for the money, they're glad to drop the bucks... and that goes for comic fans and casual readers, too!"
—Bobby Dalrymple

The "Team Player" Award

Geoff Johns

Sure, Johns has done solo books—but as his work on ***JSA***, ***Avengers***, the ***JLA/JSA*** graphic novel and now ***Teen Titans*** shows he is truly one of the best writers of team books out there."
—Tony Bowers

The "Lost Generation" Award

The absence of young comic readers

"'Mom, can I have $10.00 for 3 comics?' In the words of the immortal *Stan Lee*, 'Nuff Said.'"
—Steven Pearlman

The MIA Award

Jesus!

"A couple of years ago, *Frank Miller* talked about the series he was going to do about Jesus. Whatever happened there? I was actually excited to see what Miller would do with the greatest story of them all..."
—Ron Burkhalter

The "Barbarians at the Gates" Award

Conan

"In one 25¢ comic, *Kurt Busiek* and *Cary Nord* remind us why people got excited about ***Conan*** comics all those years ago; this is barbaric action-adventure that actually shows a respect for Robert E. Howard's concepts. Yay!"
—Cooper Smith

The "Let Them Eat Cake" Award, Parts 7 & 8

Josh Whedon's Fray

"After delays, issue six shipped on 3-27-02. Issue seven shipped the end of April 2003 and the final issue (#8) shipped on 8-06-03. That is over sixteen months to publish two comics and finish an eight issue miniseries storyline that began in early 2001! *Mr. Whedon* has successfully joined that select group of creators who apparently have little regard for their comic-buying fans."
—Roy C. Gosewehr

The "What's Love Got to Do With It?" Award

Romance comics

"We can get romance reprint books that add silly word balloons to old romance classics, so why can't we get the real things? Romance seems to sell very well on the manga shelves, so let's try it in American comics, too."
—Karen Lanham

The "I Think I'm Turning Japanese" Award

Duel Masters #1

"I heard that the first issue of the *Duel Masters* comic would be bagged with one of five different promotional cards, so I ordered five copies from my local comics retailer to make sure that I got all five. So what did I get? Five useless Japanese language cards that can't be played in the English-language game, that's what. Grr..."
—Alan Phitides

The "Chicken or the Egg" Award

JLA/Avengers #1

"A classic moment: seeing Hawkeye check out the JLA, then dismiss them as "nothing but a bunch of Squadron Supreme wannabees!"
—Hector Arantes

The "Strip Show" Award

Comic strip collections

"Why do so few comic shops have a good selection of comic strip reprints? And why aren't some of the best strips in the papers today, like ***For Better or For Worse*** and ***Luann*** and ***Funky Winkerbean***, available in collected form? There are a lot of great comic strips that are being lost to posterity."
—Sammy Maples

The "On Defense" Award

Iron Man

"I'm disappointed to hear that Iron Man won't become the Secretary of Defense in the Marvel Universe. That was the first interesting development in Tony Stark's life in about twenty years, and I was really curious to see how it might affect the rest of the Marvel Universe."
—Howard Siegler

The "License to Adapt" Award

James Bond

"Why are there no James Bond comics? *Warren Ellis* has shown in series like ***Reload*** and ***Red*** that he could write a great James Bond. Someone get a license and put this man to work!"
—Chase Gillespie

The "Those Who Can't..." Award

The flood of art instruction books

"Have you noticed how many comic art instruction books there are—and how most of them are done by people who've never done any comics work that anyone has ever heard of?"
—Riley Forrester

The "Where The Girls Aren't" Award

The absence of youth and female-oriented comics

"The industry as a whole in America are ignoring the 13-17, the pre-teen, and the 5-and-under comics audience, as well as females of all age groups. I'm sorry, guys ,but most of the female characters created for the American comic and video game market, like Lara Croft and the current Batgirl, are appealing primarily to guys; to me, they seem like they're basically guys with boobs. Examples of well done female characters would be those from ***Elfquest, Girl Genius, Neotopia, Sleeping Dragons,*** and many of the characters from the late fifties to the early eighties before the industy decided that dark, gritty and bloody was the only way to go... Why do other countries like Japan, France, Italy and Britain, to name a few, still remember those sections of the comics audience?"
—Nina Tversky

"The Shortsighted Viz-ion" Award

Viz

"They cancelled all of their comics, most of them in mid-story, and forced us to buy trade paperbacks that included a lot of stories we had already bought part of. Booo.."
—Samara Weera

The "Sheer Mad-ness" Award

Joe Madureira

"He was one of the most talented guys in comics, and fans loved his ***Battle Chasers,*** so he thanked them by thumbing his nose at his readers and leaving them hanging with out even having the courtesy to finish his own story before turning his back on everyone. Talk about ingratitude!... Don't expect a lame ***Street Fighter*** backup to make us all come flocking back, Mad!"
—Carter McMann

The "Fall of Troy" Award

Death of Donna Troy

"It's been a bad run of luck for Wonder Woman... first her mother dies, then Donna Troy is killed. I never saw that one coming, either—good job of surprising the reader, Judd!"
--Eddie Becerra

The "Say Plissken Thank You" Award

John Carpenter's Snake Plissken

"It's a shame that this book got caught up in the CrossGen implosion. It was a great comic that really captured the feel of Escape from New York, and I bet it would have done great once that film was reissued on DVD. But now there's no comic out there to tie in with the DVD release."
—Randall Stamey

The "Should Auld Acquaintance" Award

Neil Gaiman

"After a few years away from comics, he returns with not one but two great ***books—Sandman: Endless Nights*** and ***Marvel 1602.*** Now I want him to double that output in 2004 (fans are a demanding lot...)."
—Kenyon Womack

The "Conner Has Two Daddies" Award

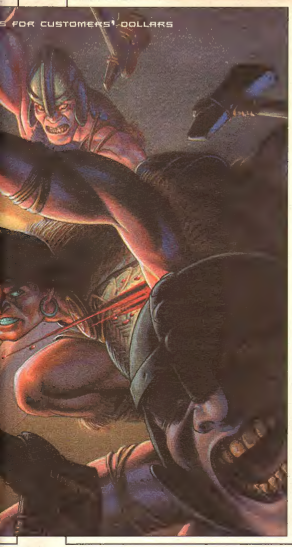
Superboy

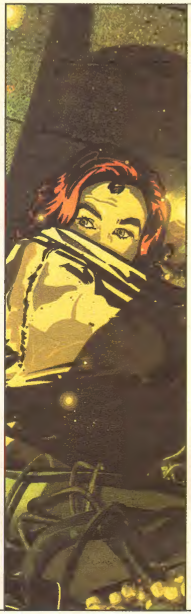
"Who'd have thunk it? Conner Kent is actually the son of Superman *and* Lex Luthor! Adds a new chapter to the Kent Family Chronicles, doesn't it?"
—Danny Minter

The "Strange Delays" Award

J. Michael Straczynski's Dr. Strange

Every time he shows up in ***Amazing Spider-Man,*** Dr. Strange gets a footnote referring to his upcoming miniseries. So where is it?"
--Austin Griggs





There's a **PLAGUE** in **GOTHAM CITY**.
Is her *Kiss* the **cause** or the **cure?**

BATMAN & POISON IVY
CAST SHADOWS
Written by Ann Nocenti
Featuring the stunning painted art of John Van Fleet

A 64-page painted special
Premiering in March

Comic Shop Locator Service: 1-888-COMIC BOOK or dccomics.com
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The "Fabric of Reality" Award

Blankets

"*Craig Thompson* produced one of the few (perhaps the only) real graphic novels that comics has ever seen. It's hard to believe that anyone could have the determination to do hundreds of pages of comics without serializing some of the story in pamphlet form just to help pay the bills. Don't miss it!"

—Neela Lippman

The "Belly Up to the Bar" Award

Oni, MV, Devil's Due, and everyone who refuses to use bar codes

"Do you have room for one retailer Red K? Those of us who are trying to move into the 21st century with comic book retailing would really appreciate a little help from the Luddites who refuse to put bar codes on their comics. Don't these guys *want* us to order their books accurately?"

—Greg Byars

The "Win, Place, & Shonen" Award

Shonen Jump

"Makes American comics seem puny by comparison. Just imagine if DC or Marvel could give us a package this thick for less than five dollars per issue!"

—Tarik Kayed

The "Flash Back" Award

Barry Allen's cameo in Flash #200

"Yes, I understand it... but I'd rather not think about it any more than I have to!..."

—Cora Worden

The "Boldly Go Where No Publisher Is Currently Going" Award

Star Trek

"Can you believe that there isn't a single ***Star Trek*** comic book on the stands? Even the worst series (***Voyager***, anyone?) had about fifty times more viewers than the best-selling comic book today. Someone needs to do right by Kirk, Spock, Picard, and the rest of the various Trek characters."

—Alice Curzon

The "Name Brand" Award

Todd McFarlane

"Who's this Todd McFarlane guy that *Neil Gaiman* is battling in court? It's weird—there used to be a comic creator by the same name, but no one's seen anything from him in years..."

—Martin Sklar

The "Saran Wrap" Award

Alberto Dose

"Check out Dose's version of Batman in ***Flash #204***; his costume is so clingy that you can see Batman's veins not only through his costume, but through his *gloves*, too! Would someone buy Alberto a pair of gloves so that he can get some idea how fabric *really* looks on the human body?"

—Mike Haynes

The "RK is A-OK" Award

Robert Kirkman

"Superheroes, satire, horror, adventure, suspense—*Robert Kirkman* has done it all this year, and he's done it all very well. This jack-of-all-trades writer is the next *Brian Bendis*, and it's only a matter of time until he gets a major assignment and becomes a superstar."

—Lee Moran

The "MIA" Award

Leave It To Chance

I thought that *James Robinson* and *Paul Smith* were going to bring ***Leave It To Chance*** back on a regular basis?

—Paula Kaylor

The "Shell-Shocked" Award

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

"Why can't we get a good TMNT comic? *Peter David* did an okay job producing a comic based on the animated series, but I'm talking about a real TMNT comic, in the vein of the Eastman and Laird original. And for that matter, why isn't the Eastman and Laird material on the comic shop racks? These books could be steady sellers if they were all in print."

—Kip Carden

The "Urinsane" Award

Uncanny X-Men

"When the X-Men were captured by Azazel, Iceman was decapitated, so Havoc offered to pee over his head to give him the opportunity to grow a new body...made of urine...thank God Bobby find *another* way to grow his body back!"

—Manuel Alejandro Macias

And the Winner and Still Champeen...

Steve Chung!

While Steve Chung didn't submit quite as many nominations as he did the year before—he, he's busy writing for comic websites, too!—Steve still found time to submit dozens of Red K Awards, which means he retains his title as the most prolific Red K-er! While many other readers used the Red K as a chance to take a shot at things or people that aggravated them in the past year, most of Steve's awards praised outstanding books and their creators. Here are some of Steve's best:

The "Talking About My Generations" Award

Superman And Batman: Generations III.

"*John Byrne* takes us down the family line of The Man of Steel and The Dark Knight."

The "Starlin Developments" Award

Marvel Universe: The End

"*Jim Starlin*, *AlMilgrom*, *Christie Scheele*, and *Heroic Age*. present a possible future and its untimely end averted by the most unlikely of characters... Thanos!"

The "What A Tangled Web We Wove" Award

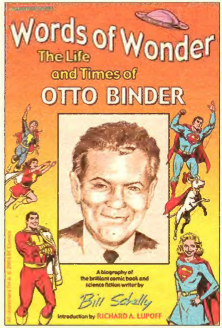
Spider-Man: Tangled Webs

"I hated to see the cancellation of ***Spider-Man:Tangled Webs***, which gave creators the chance to produce some off-beat stories of the web-spinner."

The "Remember The Titans" Award

The Teen Titans Swingin' Elseworlds Special

Readers must have felt like swingin' when D.C. shelved the book by *Bob Haney*, *Nick Cardy*, *Jay Stephens*, and *Mike Allred* due to concerns over flooding the racks with Elseworld books and confusing viewers with the Silver Age incarnation of the Teen Titans! I would definitely put my money where my mouth is and buy the book so that I could savor this story by the creative team (two of whom I consider to be the definitive Titans team)."


Words of Wonder
The Life and Times of
OTTO BINDER
A biography of the brilliant comic book and science fiction writer by
Bill Schelly
Introduction by RICHARD A. LUPOFF

The "Otto-Biography" Award

Words of Wonder - The Life And Times of Otto Binder By Bill Schelly.

"A book devoted to the co-creator of Supergirl, the Legion of Super-Heroes, Bizarro, Brainiac, and Kandor. He had also written over half of the Captain Marvel and Marvel Family stories. It was *Otto Binder* who was asked by *Mort Weisinger* to start Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen in their respective titles. Mr. Binder had also contributed stories for Captain America, Blackhawk, Black Hood, and Uncle Sam. Adam Link, Krypto The Super-Dog, Elastic Lad, Lucy Lane, and the Superman Emergency Squad were also among his well-known creations. He wrote the first D.C. "Imaginary Story" and thanks to Mr. Binder, readers didn't have to just imagine..."

The "Comic Book Book" Award

The Silver Age Of Comic Book Art By Arlen Schumer

"Featuring the art of *Neal Adams*, *Gene Colan*, *Steve Ditko*, *Carmine Infantino*, *Gil Kane*, *Jack Kirby*, *Joe Kubert*, and *Jim Steranko*, the reader is also treated to the importance of the work and effects on the medium in this distinctive comic book look."

The "Good As Gold" Award

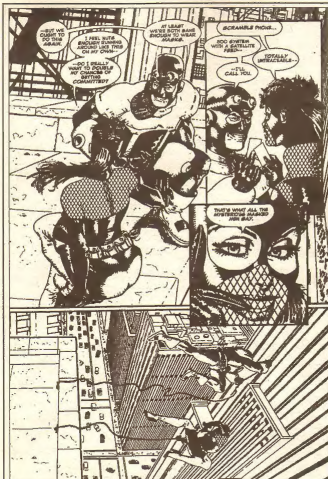
World's Best Comics: The Golden Age DC Archives Sampler.

"For 99 pennies, four Golden Age stories of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Plastic Man are yours to read!"

The "Talking Turkey" Award

JSA #54

"The JSA and JLA gather for the Thanksgiving holiday, with two old foes picking the worst time to enact their revenge! What a great holiday story—and it focuses on a holiday usually overlooked in comics!"


CLOSE WE GOT TO YOU FOR SURE AGAIN...
I FEEL BURNS AROUND HIS HEAD LIKE THIS OH MY GOD!
OH, I COULD HAVE SO DOUBLE MY SISTER'S COMMITTED!
SCRAMBLE PHONE...
AT LEAST WE'RE BOTH MAKE MONEY OFF THIS!
NOW WHERE WITH A SATELLITE PHONE?
CALL YOU.
VISUALLY IMPECCABLE.
THAT'S WHAT ALL THE HYPOTHESIS BEHIND HIM SAY.

Quick Takes

by Cliff Biggers

Mighty Love

Howard Chaykin (W/A)
(DC, $24.95)

What do you get when you cross Moonlighting and superheroes? You get *Mighty Love*, a graphic novel by Howard Chaykin that presents a clever, irreverent tale of romance that just happens to star a pair of superheroes so different in their crimefighting approaches that they make Hawk and Dove seem like clones.

What makes *Mighty Love* succeed is that Chaykin isn't working so hard to push the edge. When he's on his game, Chaykin is one of the best in the field; problem is, his past successes have raised the bar. This time around, though, Chaykin seems to have put the bar to the side, instead doing what he does best—creating acerbic, sometimes caustic characters with a quirky charm, casting them against one another, and letting the opposites attract.

One of them fights to get thugs off the street; the other combats corruption within the system. In their civilian identities one of them is a public defender; the other is a hard-boiled cop. You might be a bit surprised to learn which is which, though...

Sure, the Addison-Hayes-*Moonlighting* vibes are frequent and redolent—but the love-hate relationship has a rich literary heritage that long predates that popular 80s series. The dialogue has the wish-I'd-said-that quality, reminiscent of middle-period *Robert A. Heinlein*, that typifies Chaykin—it's witty, cinematic, and it works beautifully on the printed page.

As for the art—well, it's some of the best work Chaykin's done in years, showing the eye for page design and the masterful linework that made Chaykin a comic star to begin with.

Mighty Love is a delightful read that'll remind readers of Chaykin's work on American Flagg! Now, when do we get more romantic misadventures of Skylark and Iron Angel? Grade - A

FITFUL ORDER 1903 GRANTED NATURALLY BORN CHILDREN OF VAMPIRES THE RIGHT TO SERVE AS NUNS AND PRIESTS.
MONSIGNOR DYLAN KELLY OPPOSED 1903, BUT HE'S A LOYAL SOLDIER OF CHRIST WHO FOLLOWS ROME'S LEAD.
I HAVE TO APPEAR WITH YOU, AND I MEAN RIGHT NOW!
OF COURSE, MONSIGNOR KELLY—WE'RE FINISHED HERE.
BACK AGAIN, WENDY?
I ONLY WISH THE FAMILY'S PROBLEMS WERE AS EASILY SOLVED!
SHADOW
LET'S KEEP OUR LITTLE CHAT BETWEEN US, HUH? UNLESS YOU WANT TO GET IN FIRST.
MONSIGNOR KELLY IS A GOOD MAN AND VENGEFUL—VERY SERIOUSLY.
WHY LIFE-AND-DEATH?
THANKS FOR SAVING FATHER.
I'M SO SORRY I'M LATE, SLOW...
IT'S YOUR FATHER!
ABOUT WENDY'S MONSIGNOR...
GOING OTHER TOWN, LATER...
WE'VE GOT SOMETHING FAR MORE IMPORTANT TO DISCUSS!
YES! A GUY WHO'S CLAWED HIS WAY TO THE TOP OF THE FREESTLY HIERARCHY THROUGH POLITICAL SWIFT!
ONE MIGHT THINK MONSIGNOR KELLY WOULD BE WILD TO HAVE A LITTLE SINCERITY.
EDUARDO, ALL TORO!

Bite Club

Howard Chaykin & David Tischman (W); David Hahn (A)
(Vertigo, $2.95)

If *Mighty Love* reverberated with echoes of *American Flagg!*, then *Bite Club* shares sympathetic vibes with *Black Kiss*, Chaykin's taboo-breaking story of sex and murder. This is a much darker, more provocative Chaykin, who—along with co-writer *David Tischman*—is making a much more conscious effort to shock, to test the boundaries of a mainline Vertigo comic.

Bite Club offers a Sopranos-like look at crime from the inside—but the twist here is that the mob is intermingled with vampires in modern Miami... not a city that readers typically think of as a vampiric wonderland. To further complicate things, the story begins with the death of a vampiric mob capo—and the son who is chosen to continue his dynasty happens to be Miami's first vampire priest.

Not only does *Bite Club* seem more forced than *Mighty Love*, it also has a bit of a disconnect between story and art. The edginess of the series calls for a harder, sharper, grittier art style, and *David Hahn's* clean-line approach doesn't always deliver. He does a capable job, but the absence of Chaykinesque art sometimes hampers the effectiveness of the story.

Still, *Bite Club* shows a great deal of promise, and the first issue delivers sufficiently well that I'll be back for another installment. Now, if only Chaykin & Tischman would quit working so hard to shock... *Grade - B*

The locals disagreed.
They were on a crusade and nothing, not even facts, would stand in their way.
Then it happened... exactly what the parents needed to add fire to their crusade against Aleister...
Some pumpkin headed dirt-eater chopped off his little brother's hand, and everybody knew Aleister's Creature Posture would take the fall.
Somebody had to be blamed and Aleister Arcane was a prime target.

Phantom Jack #1

Mike SanGiacomo (W); Mitchell Breitweiser (A)
(Image, $2.95)

And now, the best Epic series that Epic didn't publish...

It's a shame that Epic chose to kick off with the sensationalistic-but-wholly-unsatisfying *Trouble*; had they instead launched with books like *Phantom Jack*, they might have made a much more positive impression.

Phantom Jack takes one of the superpower chestnuts, invisibility, and makes it seem fresh and believable. The protagonist is a reporter with the power of invisibility—quite a gift for someone in his line of work. His life is less focused on what he can do, however, than on what he didn't do; a mistake earlier in his life led to the death of a friend, and that death is the catalyst for the current storyline,which takes Jack back to the Middle East to try to right some past wrongs.

Michael SanGiacomo's story relies more on characterization than on superpowers, so he has wisely chosen an artist who can illustrate normal people in believable situations. *Mitch Breitweiser*, like *John Cassaday* and *Gary Frank*, is an understated visual storyteller who can convey dramatic tension and contemporary realism without superheroic overkill.

Too bad for Epic that they let this one go—but it's good news for Image, who gets to add another quality book to their line. *Grade - A*

Aleister Arcane Book One: The Horror Show

Steve Niles (W); Breehn Burns (A)
(IDW $3.99)

At first, *Aleister Arcane* might sound like a horror-humor series—after all, the star of the book is a kitschy late-night-TV horror host. But don't ever expect the obvious from *Steve Niles*...

Aleister Green—better known by his on-screen name of Aleister Arcane—is a horror host without a show, a casualty of misguided public concerns and a tendency to blame scapegoats rather than individual responsibility. His life is marred by the tragedy, the lighthearted gruesomeness of his on-air persona forever recast as something twisted and depraved. Problem is, there really are self-fulfilling prophecies...

Niles once again demonstrates that he's the modern master of comics horror, but he's done that so frequently that it's almost taken for granted. What people will be talking about, I suspect, is the stunning art by newcomer *Breehn Burns*, whose distinctive painting style is visually captivating from the first page. First Ben Templesmith, then Breehn Burns—Niles has such an eye for first-class artistry that he could make a pretty good career for himself as an editor if he weren't so good at what he's doing.

As far as his storytelling is concerned—I'm not sure why Niles isn't making his fortune in films, but comic readers should be glad that he's chosen this medium instead. It's refreshing to find a horror writer who knows the difference between mayhem and mood, and realizes that horror can be much more effective if it relies on the latter. *—Grade - A*

Steve Rude's The Moth #1

Gary Martin (W); Steve Rude & Gary Martin (A)
(Dark Horse, $2.99)

Kirby flashback!

I suspect that will be the response of many veteran fans to this quirky, high-energy comic. In many ways, ***The Moth*** is reminiscent of Simon & Kirby's *Fighting American*—it's bold and explosive, filled with lightweight satire and social commentary, but ultimately a bit superficial.

Gary Martin's story seems to be little more than a framework for Rude to do his artistic thing; there's just not a lot of depth of complexity here. While the story is two-dimensional, though, Rude's art is filled with dimension and vitality; like classic Kirby, some panels seem to leap from the page (makes you wonder what 3-D-meister *Ray Zone* might do with a book so well suited for the third-dimension treatment).

The Moth is a concept that cries out for the sharp, unpredictable storytelling of *Mike Baron* (ah, what a book it might have been had these two chosen to reunite!); as it is, the book offers a visual treat but not a whole lot else. *Grade - B-*

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